

Catwalks

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Summary: A scientist is rescued by a man in an orange environmental suit.

Catwalks

"Catwalks"

"Take me with you! I'm the one man who knows everyâ€"

> The scientist's last syllable was reduced to a scream of surprise and pain as a 9mm tracer grazed the back of his thigh. He staggered behind a ten-foot tall wooden crate, hoping to find cover from the soldiers occupying the two levels of steel catwalks above. His co-worker, however, did not stop and instead ran across the floor toward the stairs on the other side of the room, hoping to find cover underneath them. It did not work: the scientist watched as his co-worker, whom he had only known for a few days, stumbled and fell to the concrete floor, a bullet finding its mark in the back of his skull. "Move in!" shouted a soldier from somewhere above. Panic gripped him as he heard running footsteps approaching him from behind. He shut his eyes in terror.<p>

"Shit! We got hostiles!" a soldier immediately above him shouted, as the footsteps coming toward the scientist went past him. He opened his eyes in time to see a man in an orange environmental suit open fire on the soldiers with a machine gun. A thud from the catwalk immediately above him signaled a lethal hit already. The man quickly crouched behind another crate, drawing the two remaining soldiers' fire away from the scientist. One of them shouted from several dozen yards above and away: "Squad, stay down!" From a makeshift sandbag fort on the above level emerged a grenade, its trajectory carrying it straight toward the man's position behind the crate. But no sooner had it begun its descent than the man darted out and with lightning speed raised his weapon and fired at the grenadier. One of the rounds pierced the mask underneath his helmet, dropping him instantly. The man dashed toward the stairs, which the other scientist had failed to reach only moments ago, and crouched underneath them. The running

footsteps of the last remaining soldier were amplified by the steel frames of the catwalks as he made his way down to the fort. Adrenaline tends to cloud one's judgment, the scientist knew, and apparently so did his would-be savior. The man in the suit was waiting for the soldier to hastily make his way down to the second level, which he did, whereupon the man leapt out backwards from underneath the stairs and unloaded several rounds into the unprotected face of the squad leader.

Then there was silence, except for the hum of the ventilation ducts high above. With the danger over, the scientist breathed an immense sigh of relief. The bullet wound on his thigh was superficial and could be remedied with simple first aid. The man in the environmental suit looked at him and motioned for him to follow. The scientist was pleased: at least he didn't have to be alone. "With my brains and your brawn, we'll make an excellent team!" he exclaimed. The man gave him a quizzical expression. Reloading his machine gun, the man turned and proceeded up the steps, past a cable dangling from the ceiling high above. The scientist followed suit, brushing the cable out of the way.

Something went wrong. There was a sudden, intense pressure in his throat. Grasping reflexively, he was shocked to discover that the cable was somehow wrapped around his neck! Then the pressure in his throat increased tenfold as the cable began lifting him into the air, the stairs falling away from his feet. Grasping at the cord, he looked up and saw a dark red shape immediately above him, somewhat concealed by the shadows. A barnacle, some analytical portion of his mind informed him. And that realization was immediately followed by another: that he was caught in the creature's tongue and it was steadily pulling him up to its waiting mouth. And then panic took hold as he tried to loosen the grip around his neck, which served only to stimulate the tongue and tighten its grip, causing a rush of stars to fill his vision and a soft crackling sound to resonate through his skull. Through the stars and searing pain he could see the barnacle getting closer, its tongue disappearing into its mouth, taking him with it. Sheer terror overwhelmed him as he desperately failed his limbs. He tried to scream, but his windpipe was nearly crushed. Then his vision went dark and a sticky heat covered his face, and new sharp pains encircled his lower neck like dozens of knives and it was then that he realized that the thing had him in its mouth. This is it, he thought, just as he felt a sharp crack as the creature bit down, crushing his cervical vertebrae. He immediately felt a painful tingle in his extremities, as if they had gone to sleep. Another crack, not as loud, and the tingle was gone. His spinal cord had been severed.

And as the scientist began to lose consciousness, enveloped in darkness and heat and pain, he could faintly make out the voice of the man in the HEV suit.

He was laughing.

End
file.